



# **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

1 Airport Road  
Glasgow, MT 59230  
4/10/2017

## **Scoping Notice**

To whom it may concern,

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to purchase a perpetual conservation easement, located approximately 5 miles southeast of Hinsdale, MT. The property, known as Ash Coulee (Appendix A), totals approximately 4,800 deeded acres. The first step in the environmental review process is scoping. FWP invites the public to identify any issues and concerns related to this proposal. FWP will then prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) and invite further public comment before recommending a final decision to the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

### Background

FWP is required to conduct public scoping for land acquisition projects involving 640 or more acres (MCA 87-1-218) to identify issues and concerns as an initial phase of an environmental review. Subsequent to the scoping phase, an environmental assessment would be completed by FWP with alternatives and analysis that address concerns raised during scoping. FWP has released this scoping notice, which is also posted on the Department's web site and area news outlets.

### Proposal

The proposed conservation easement encompasses approximately 4,800 deeded acres. The property provides very productive riparian and wetland habitats and native shrub and plains grasslands. The owner, Carroll Family Limited Partnership, is interested in selling a conservation easement to FWP to streamline and potentially expand their current livestock operation, and to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat, while ensuring public recreational access.

### Overview of Property Resources

The Ash Coulee property is composed of approximately 4,800 deeded acres and provides access to approximately 180 acres of Bureau of Land Management land. The property lies adjacent to the FWP Vandalia Wildlife Management Area, publicly accessible Department of Natural Resource and Conservation land and is near the Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement, administered by FWP. Approximately 1,400 acres are located along 11 miles of the Milk River, and there are approximately 3,400 acres of native grasslands bisected by Ash Coulee. This ranch provides very productive riparian and wetland habitats and native shrub and plains grasslands, all of which have been identified as state priority habitats. The Milk River portion of this ranch includes important year-round habitat for ring-necked pheasants, white-tailed deer, and many other resident wildlife species. The oxbow wetlands provide spring, summer and fall habitat for a variety of waterfowl. The dense shrubby under story provides a key wintering area for sharp-tailed grouse, and turkeys use the property during all seasons. The uplands include important year-round habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, partridge, mule deer and antelope, and many other

resident wildlife species. Ash Coulee, found in the core of the uplands, provides critical winter range for antelope and mule deer, and is part of a designated sage-grouse connectivity area between silver sagebrush habitats to the north and the big sagebrush to the south.

#### Overview on FWP Conservation Easements

FWP's conservation easements are intended to conserve conservation values of the land while allowing for traditional agricultural uses. The department's easements typically include allowances and restrictions on a variety of land uses including vegetation management, constructing residences, subdivision of land, public access for wildlife-related recreation, farming, grazing practices, energy development, and other uses pertinent to the land's conservation values.

#### Development of a Management Plan

In addition to the Deed of Conservation Easement, FWP would develop a Management Plan that documents strategies for land management and recreational access in which FWP and the owner would be cooperating to ensure consistency with the terms and intent of the conservation easement.

#### Opportunities for Public Involvement

Formal public participation specific to FWP's proposed purchase of this conservation easement begins with this scoping process. Public scoping comments will help in the development of a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) which will be available for a 30 day public review, likely late in 2017. Land projects also require approval from the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Montana State Board of Land Commissioners.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is requesting public input and comments (scoping) on the proposed project from April 12 – May 11, 2017. If you have any written comments regarding the proposed project, please mail them to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, c/o Ash Coulee Conservation Easement Proposal, 1 Airport Rd., Glasgow, MT 59230. Or, email comments to [dhenry@mt.gov](mailto:dhenry@mt.gov) Attn: Ash Coulee Conservation Easement Proposal.

If you have any questions regarding the proposed project, please call Drew Henry at (406) 228-3709 (FWP Area Wildlife Biologist) or e-mail questions to [dhenry@mt.gov](mailto:dhenry@mt.gov).

Thanks for your time and consideration of this proposed conservation easement project.

Sincerely,



Mark Sullivan  
Region 6 Supervisor

Appendix A. The Ash Coulee property boundaries proposed for Conservation Easement.

